

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1 Part II

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Death of a Mystery Man

Elements of International Intrigue Surface After 'Routine' Crime

By PATT MORRISON, Times Staff Writer

On the police blotter, it is a robbery-murder of the sort that happens with dismaying regularity in Los Angeles these days: an 82-year-old man trussed up and dead of a heart attack, his fourth-floor apartment ransacked, valuable gold heirlooms taken.

But to his brother-in-law, it has the unsettling look of a Graham Greene spy story. He finds it odd that a former Navy intelligence man—decorated by the governments of Spain and Mexico for hush-hush services rendered during World War II, an American liaison officer to Britain's Lord Mountbatten of Burma, a decoding expert who visited such wartime hot spots as Saipan and Tinian, and who even years later made mysterious trips to Mexico and Europe, usually with a bodyguard, a man cautious and secretive—was killed in his own apartment with no sign of forced entry.

"It's a complex case," agreed Sgt. Wayne Horton, whose Wilshire Division detectives have labored to solve the case since the body was found. Horton said they would check with the CIA and the FBI, but he added that there is no indication that it was anything other than a robbery-murder (police speculate that the victim died while being tied up).

The body of retired Cmdr. Stuart P. James was found stuffed under the kitchen sink of his mid-Wilshire apartment nine days ago.

His brother-in-law, Robert Ferrera, found the body when he delivered James' Social Security check and the retired Navy man did not answer the elaborate secret knock that he had insisted his acquaintances use since he was mugged out front six months earlier—a coded knock that he changed every few months as a security precaution.

James had evidently just returned from a market when the intruder caught up with him—groceries were strewn on the floor. So were the contents of the apartment where he had lived for eight years. The place, police said, was "completely ransacked." And in a green attache case usually hidden in the closet, the intruder found and stole:

- A large gold medal, possibly the Order of the Aztec Eagle, awarded to James by Mexican President Miguel Aleman in 1947, for exceptional services of an unspecified nature.

- A heavy gold watch, its face made of an American \$20 "double eagle" gold piece and inscribed on the back "A SPJ, con las gracias del pais (with the country's thanks), Miguel," and a gold chain so ornate "you'd be a jackass to wear it in public," Ferrera said.

- Another large gold medal, this one from the government of Spain, presented in 1946 for unknown wartime services rendered.

Ferrera believes that James, a "very, very careful man" who wouldn't even open the door for probate attorneys when his brother died in Bakersfield not long ago, may have been done in for something he knew, not something he owned.

There is "plenty of reason to believe it was not just robbery," said Ferrera, who had first met the man that his sister, Irma, would later marry, in the South Pacific in 1942.

Reluctant to Talk

James, a Stanford letterman, went into the Navy in 1939, and even after he left the service in 1946, he was close-mouthed, with more than the usual diffidence of men home from war, Ferrera says. "All he would say was, 'I did my part.'"

Apartment manager Gertrude Rubenstein said that aside from

walks to visit friends at the Park La Brea complex, and solitary dinners at a little restaurant down the street, "he kept to himself pretty much."

Even after the war, working as a real estate appraiser traveling the world, and later in retirement, James "was very paranoid" about what he had done in the war—and subsequently as well, Ferrera said, indicating that his brother-in-law could have continued working for the U.S. government until as recently as 10 years ago.

Sensitive Information

"He'd known sensitive U.S. information—he thought it was sensitive," Ferrera said. He traveled often to Mexico, where he held honorary dual citizenship, and was invariably protected by "bodyguards supplied by the U.S. Embassy or Mexican government," Ferrera said. A reporter's call to the embassy in Mexico City was not returned.

"He kept saying he had to make one final trip to serve his country," said Ferrera, who said James was still afraid of things he had done when he was young—that people may (still) be angry about."